James Madison and the War of 1812

James Madison was born on March 16, 1751, in Port Conway, King George, Virginia. As a young man, he attended Princeton (then called the College of New Jersey). He married Dolley Payne Todd Madison in September 1794.

Madison was active in government. He took part in writing the Virginia Constitution in 1776, served in the Continental Congress, and was a leader in the Virginia Assembly. Madison often took part in the debates at the Constitutional Convention assembled at Philadelphia. Serving in Congress, he helped write the Bill of Rights. He served as Secretary of State under President Thomas Jefferson.

James Madison became president in 1809. He served two terms through 1817. He was president at a difficult time. England and France were fighting the Napoleonic wars. As a result, the U.S. economy was suffering. The United States attempted to remain neutral. However, ships were being attacked at sea by both sides. Eventually, Napoleon, the leader of France, agreed to stop attacking American ships.

Madison also faced problems on the western frontier. Native Americans and settlers were fighting. Many of the Indian tribes had become allies of Great Britain. The chief of the Shawnee tribe, Tecumseh, even tried to form a group of tribes to resist American settlement.

Meanwhile, some people were pushing for war against England. They wanted to go to war for several reasons. For example, Great Britain would kidnap sailors from American ships and force them to serve on British warships. The British also sided with the Indian tribes on the western frontier. War with England was declared in June 1812.

The war was terrible for everyone, including the president and his family. In August 1814, British troops burned the nation’s capital. Dolley Madison, the First Lady, managed to save many valuable government documents from the flames. Those items included the Declaration of Independence, a portrait of George Washington, and the national seal.

The War of 1812 finally ended in December 1814. Ironically, two weeks after peace was declared, the bloodiest battle of the war took place in New Orleans. Word of the peace settlement had not yet traveled to the front lines. Not knowing the war was over, British troops attacked the city. General Andrew Jackson and his troops fought bravely. The British lost more than 2,000 soldiers. The Americans suffered only 21 losses.